

# MODERN RESIGNATION TO POSTMODERN DESPAIR IN DON DELILLO'S *COSMOPOLIS* AND *FALLING MAN*

Reading DeLillo through Baudrillard, Derrida, and Kierkegaard

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**ABSTRACT** • This article investigates how DeLillo depicts the impact of 9/11 in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* through the antagonistic (intratextual) and oppositional (intertextual) connections between their characters, and then proves the importance of counter-narrative as a means to survive the encounter with communal and private tragedies. To this end, the article provides a complementary analysis of DeLillo's characterizations and stylistic choices in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*, reading the novels through the lens of DeLillo's essay "In the Ruins of the Future" (2001), Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and "The Spirit of Terrorism" (2002), Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1967), and Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843). While the two novels offer a Postmodern sublimation of the defining features and challenges of the post-9/11 lost sense of reality, I argue that Kierkegaard's Modern philosophy is the key to a comprehensive reading of them, as it offers the theoretical ground for a metaphorical leap of faith that grants access to "a higher realm" of acceptance, overcoming the feeling of bewilderment and alienation in the aftermath of the late modern age.

**KEYWORDS** • 9/11 Fiction; Postmodernism; Modernism; Transcendentality; Art.

## 1. Introduction and Methodology

The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 left the American collective imagination in shambles. Not only did the attack destroy the foundations of the Western capitalist iconographic temple *par excellence* but it also pervaded the intimacy of the American home through the news coverage onslaught of jarring images. The inability to communicate the ensuing fear and shock fostered the emergence of counter-narratives attempting to trigger a healing process and elaborate both the collective and personal trauma caused by the event. Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2007) represent perfect iterations of such counter-narratives in which the characters embody the feeling of bewilderment and alienation in the aftermath of the late modern age and attempt to navigate this aftermath through processes of trial and error.

This article investigates how DeLillo depicts the impact of 9/11 on people's lives through the antagonistic (intratextual) and oppositional (intertextual) connections between his characters, and then proves the importance of counter-narrative as a means to survive the encounter with

catastrophic change. The two novels have been extensively analyzed in reference to issues such as temporality, characterizations, and their critical reflections on terrorism, neoliberal capitalism, and grieving—as it may be evinced by the scholarly literature referenced throughout this text. While they are often put in conversation with other DeLillo’s works, such as *Mao II* (1991) and *The Body Artist* (2001) for the way several themes—in this case, mostly global terrorism, grieving, and redemption—are developed in time, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* rarely<sup>1</sup> seem to be paired together as a complementary unit, as two sides of the same coin. I argue, instead, that the two novels offer together a reflection in Postmodern fashion on the defining features and challenges of the post-9/11 American existence in its inherent confusion stemming from the inability to comprehend and articulate reality after the event. In doing so, they unfold on a continuum where *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* are on opposite ends, so much that the two novels not only share structural similarities, but their main characters represent the perfect embodiment of the Kierkegaardian stages of *aesthetic*—Eric in *Cosmopolis* and Keith in *Falling Man*—and *ethical* life-view—Lianne in *Falling Man*—which are thus presented to the reader as modes of existence that respond and react—antithetically to each other—to the disarray which leads to and follows 9/11. To this end, I will delve into a complementary analysis of DeLillo’s characterizations and stylistic choices in both *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*, reading such narrative dynamics through the lens of DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future” (2001), Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and “The Spirit of Terrorism” (2002), Jacques Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* (1967), and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (1843) and *Fear and Trembling* (1843). DeLillo’s essay is a necessary companion to both novels since it presents in a condensed matter most of the ideological positions and tropes that he further elaborates in the novels. Baudrillard’s works, and Derrida’s essay, instead, provide a theoretical apparatus that not only decodes DeLillo’s themes within the Postmodern tradition, but also puts those themes in conversation with the American identity crisis in the wake of the attack. These texts—and the answers they suggest—are inevitably imbued with the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century *Zeitgeist* and therefore profoundly rely on the Postmodern mode of discourse that results in moral relativism, self-reference, and instability of meaning. On the other hand, Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*, represent the Modern juxtaposition to the Postmodern existence, and thus seek to give meaning and fill the spiritual void that comes with existential despair. I will put Kierkegaard’s texts in conversation with the novels and argue that DeLillo finds in the existentialist’s philosophy a response to the hollowness that characterizes the contemporary age.

The first part of the article sets the stage suggesting that 9/11 ultimately toppled the relationship between reality and fiction. This happened at a historical juncture where the line between the two was already in what I would define, borrowing Baudrillard’s terminology, a Postmodern *simulacral* blur, by which I mean a fuzzy stage in which reality and fiction, or better yet the sign and its copy, are interlocked in a struggle for relevance where fiction (or the copy) is upending reality (or the sign). This lost sense of reality gives rise to counter-narratives such as *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* that seek to re-establish meaning where there seems to be none. In the second part, I will focus on *Cosmopolis*, through an analysis of its protagonist, Eric Packer, an incarnation of rogue capitalism in the crystallized moment—April 2000—when the US stock market peaked.

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<sup>1</sup> One such rare example of the two novels being analyzed together is the essay “‘Because There Is Something About You, in the Way You Hold a Space’ - Don DeLillo’s New York in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*” by Alsahira Alkhayer published in June 2023 on the journal *Iperstoria* while this text was in its revision stages.

I will canvass the main nuances of Eric's behavior—violence, narcissism, and an unshakeable faith in technology—to cast him not only as a post-9/11 critique to America's self-image, but also as the embodiment of the Kierkegaardian aesthete on the path to (self-)destruction. The last part of the essay focuses on *Falling Man* showing how the lost sense of reality inevitably seeps into the fictional lives of the novel's characters, each trying to restore meaning in different ways. I will, therefore, illustrate how DeLillo depicts—in Kierkegaardian terms—Keith's *aesthetic* and Lianne's *ethical* efforts at navigating the aftermath of the event through processes of trial and error as part of their attempts to find themselves beyond routines, emotions, and simulations. What provided me with the idea to analyze these conjoint novels through Kierkegaard's lens is that Lianne herself confesses that she used to read his philosophy and that it not only represented a lifeline for her, but it also brings her towards the end of the novel on the brink of a spiritual awakening. Therefore, the quests of these characters—sometimes fruitful, sometimes futile—represents a counter-narrative that allows for temporal detachment and introspection after tragedy, thus providing not only the protagonists, but also the readers with the tools to come to terms with the loss and grief that ensued. Kierkegaard's philosophy is the key to a comprehensive reading of both novels, as it offers the theoretical ground for a metaphorical leap of faith that grants access to "a higher realm" of acceptance in the wake of communal and private tragedies.

## 2. A Lost Sense of Reality

When the two planes hit the Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001 and almost every TV channel in the world started the unrelenting news coverage, anyone watching those screens knew that they were witnessing history in its making. Just as survivors of abuse do, Americans had to navigate the subsequent trauma and sense of guilt by blaming the Other and themselves, all the while searching for a way to understand and process the event. Safe in a technocratic world order, no one seemed to notice those 19 camouflaged terrorists that seeped easily in the American "free society" and wreaked havoc to the "utopian glow of cyber-capital" (DeLillo 2001). The vulnerability of such a grandeur was subtle and can be found in what Baudrillard in his essay "The Spirit of Terrorism" (2002) defines as "an ideal of zero death" (Baudrillard 2003: 16). While advanced warfare detaches and desensitizes people and soldiers from the horrors of war by taking care of targets with drones that will immediately reduce threats to ashes, those 19 terrorists "turn[ed] their own deaths into an absolute weapon against a system that operates on the basis of the exclusion of death" (Baudrillard 2003:16). And they did so by taking warfare in the living room of every American house.

9/11 was so shocking and the loss for words so total that the event could only be stylized in a numerical abbreviation that reads like a new chain of convenience stores ready to sweep up the competition. Nevertheless, in the days following the attack many writers were solicited to have their say on the event (Martin Amis, Peter Carey, David Grossman, Ian McEwan, and John Updike, to name a few); yet, most of the immediate responses were mainly "accounts, mixing journalism with memoir and written with a self-consciously 'historical' register, far from being objective" (Randall 2011: 2). Such responses also seemed to endorse an *Us against Them* ideology mirroring the hegemonic strategy that the Bush administration aptly declared with its "War on Terror". These writers' reaction was not surprising, because the problem was clearly "how to write about events which seemed to defy the logic of traditional narrative realism, and which presented a story that the whole world was already familiar with through an unending televisual loop" (Morley 2008: 295). This is the same question that Baudrillard asks in his response to the event before stating that "the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image" (Baudrillard 2003: 28). Understanding that the shock after the attack also came from its constant reiteration in the

media that absorbed the event and offered it for consumption, he wonders: “Does reality actually outstrip fiction? If it seems to do so, this is because it has absorbed fiction’s energy, and has itself become fiction. We might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image” (Baudrillard 2003: 28). Baudrillard had already warned of the disjointedness between *real* and *hyperreal* in his famous book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), claiming that “it is *now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real*” (italics not mine, Baudrillard 1994: 21), since today’s abstraction leads to a simulation able to generate models or copies of the real that have no original. This copy or model without original becomes then a *simulacrum* that overwrites reality, which in turn becomes the *hyperreal*. However, in “The Spirit of Terrorism”, he elaborates on the relationship between the real and the copy or image explaining how the twist with 9/11 is that not only the image “consumes the event” (Baudrillard 2003: 27), absorbing it and offering it for consumption, but also “the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror [...] not only is it terrifying, but, what is more, it is real” (Baudrillard 2003: 29). This extra layer of realness creates a singularity that leaves no meaning or easy interpretation, thus making it very hard for writers, as well as ordinary people, to come to terms with the event.

Among the writers who felt compelled to write about 9/11, Don DeLillo was probably the most prescient one, pondering on the *simulacral* interconnection between reality and fiction already in *Mao II* (1991), where he wrote “there’s a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. [...] Now bomb-makers and gunman [...] make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated” (DeLillo 1992: 41). A similar point of view is adopted in “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September”, published on *Harper’s Magazine* two months after the event, where DeLillo claimed that “the world narrative belongs to terrorists” (DeLillo 2001). In this article, he does not seem impervious to the oppositional rhetoric of his fellow writers. In fact, throughout the essay reverberates the tone of anger and grief of a wounded New Yorker who witnessed how his world “crumbled into theirs” (DeLillo 2001). DeLillo uses different registers to express his discomfort: “from journalistic to novelistic, from critical analysis to autobiography, from polemic to personal reflection” (Randall 2011: 26). After giving voice to Karen and Marc, who is the author’s nephew and was in a building near the World Trade Center during the attack, DeLillo uses the word “technology” as a euphemism for the American sense of grandeur and its political-economic domination when he describes the towers as a material metaphor for it, built in an attempt to normalize its being ungraspable:

The World Trade towers were not only an emblem of advanced technology but a justification, in a sense, for technology’s irresistible will to realise in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable. Once defined, every limit must be reached. The tactful sheathing of the towers was intended to reduce the direct threat of such straight-edge enormity, a giantism that eased over the years into something a little more familiar and comfortable, even dependable in a way. (DeLillo 2001)

He is, therefore, very much aware that “technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet” (DeLillo 2001) and such a global technological superpower is bound to be threatened even by people belonging to it because, to put it in Baudrillard’s words, the general “allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power is—happily—universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments, in their very twinness, of that definitive order” (Baudrillard 2003: 6).

In his eulogy of technology, DeLillo stresses that what outraged Americans the most is that it was used against them by people who were trying to defy everything that it stood for. Indeed, the terrorists combined modern resources with their own death, and the result was so unexpected that it left little room for clear analysis of how technology and death could be joined as such. In his essay, DeLillo turns the images of “past” and “future” into two ideological categories against

each other: “The terrorists of September 11th want to bring back the past”, whereas “we like to think that America invented the future” (DeLillo 2001). The two forces in struggle are, however, imbued with a political discourse that seemed almost unnoticed in the devastating turmoil. According to Baudrillard, instead, after the Cold War, liberal democracy came out as the winning world order, but there could never be a definitive one because a ghastly specter of revolt is inevitably endemic to “all hegemonic domination” (Baudrillard 2003: 12) and, in this case, what the terrorists were trying to bring back is “a global theocratic state, unboundaried and floating and so obsolete it must depend on suicidal fervor to gain its aim” (DeLillo 2001). The one thing that seems to stand in the way of both “the old slow furies of cut-throat religion” (DeLillo 2001) and to the global narrative implied by terrorism is counter-narrative. In those moments when meaning seems impossible to articulate, “the only weapon of power [...] is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social” (Baudrillard 1994: 22), and this is what DeLillo’s counter-narrative in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* tries to restore—the sense of reality and the meaning lost due to the terrorist attacks.

### 3. To Despair or Not to Despair

#### 3.1. The Third Twin Tower

DeLillo’s 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* seems to prophesize the 2007 collapse of Wall Street through the cautionary tale of the fall and death of twenty-eight-year-old entrepreneur Eric Packer. One day in April 2000, this ruthless capitalist decides to cut through New York City’s arteries along Forty-Seventh Street to get a haircut. His journey, which will last for the whole novel in *Ulysses*-like fashion, will force him to confront the many faces of Gotham as he runs into a funeral procession for a Sufi rap star, the presidential motorcade, an anti-globalization riot, a techno-rave and a filming location, to name a few. The moment in history that was chosen as background for Eric’s portrait is not casual—it is the end of the Clinton decade: years that were marked by a promise of limitless wealth through speculation and the arrival of new computer technologies. Jerry A. Varsava also finds the choice of the day not fortuitous and notices that “April 2000 is of symbolic value given that U.S. stock markets peaked early in 2000, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average reaching its all-time record in January at 11,908, while the tech-dominated NASDAQ hit 5,132 in intraday trading on March 10” (Varsava 2005: 83).

Eric himself feels like an integral part of this blooming age:

He went outside and crossed the avenue, then turned and faced the building where he lived. He felt contiguous with it. [...] They shared an edge of boundary, skyscraper and man. It was nine hundred feet high, the tallest residential tower in the world, a commonplace oblong whose only statement was his size. It had the kind of banality that reveals itself over time as being truly brutal. He liked it for this reason. (DeLillo 2012: 8)

Randy Laist explains that the existential identification with the skyscraper in which Eric lives and the power it holds turns him into a personification of the Twin Towers themselves, a “third” Twin Tower of sorts, that stands as “monolithic symbol of global economic hegemony” (Laist 2010: 258). The consequent race towards annihilation both financial, when he keeps on betting against the yen causing a major crisis in the stock market, and physical, when he willingly approaches the lair of his killer, could be justified as the unconscious inner desire for self-destruction. That same desire that Baudrillard describes when he states that “the symbolic collapse of a whole system came about by an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, had joined in to round off the event. In a sense, the entire system, by its internal

fragility, lent the initial action a helping hand” (Baudrillard 2003: 8). Therefore, Eric might stand as a metaphor for the suicide of capitalism and, when his advisor Vija Kinski warns him that “maybe today is the day when everything happens, for better or worse, ka-boom, like that” (DeLillo 2012: 106), it becomes evident that DeLillo might indeed be talking about the terrorist attack of September 2001. Laist also notices that Vija’s prophecy seems to predict Eric’s own crash—his plunge towards suicide—and it resonates even louder with the retrospective shadow of 9/11 (Laist 2010: 258).

In “In the Ruins of the Future”, DeLillo defines the towers as a “justification, in a sense, for technology’s irresistible will to realise in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable” (DeLillo 2001). They are a totem of the future and, as such, their very existence is a paradox, so when he mentions them in the novel they are already slowly retreating and disappearing, becoming so abstract that the protagonist has to concentrate to see them. (DeLillo 2012: 36) Together with the other skyscrapers, their body of metal, glass, and concrete only links them to the material world, discarding them in the wreckage of obsolescence that is holding back the future: “They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren’t here exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it” (DeLillo 2012: 36). Peter Boxall further clarifies the relation between time and technology by associating their essence with their materiality, thus highlighting how “in *Cosmopolis*, technology is obsolete from the moment that it acquires a material form, from the moment it is realized as hardware. The clunky stuff of the embodied world [...] is always left behind by the spirit of a technology which moves beyond the body” (Boxall 2006: 223).

Skyscrapers are not the only example of substantial datedness in Eric’s analysis of his surroundings: throughout the novel he refers to many other objects of everyday use with contempt for their antiquated technology or their lexical markers. When he sees an ATM (automated teller machine), he looks for the meaning behind the acronym, only to realize that it was “unable to escape the interference of the fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace” (DeLillo 2012: 54). The same degree of despite or mockery will befall words like “phone” (88), “office” (15), “cash register” (71), “walkie-talkie” (102), and even “computer” which “sound[ed] backward and dumb” (104). Although it may be true that most of these objects are nowadays taken for granted, it is Eric’s point of view the one at fault because of his attitude of always “thinking past what is new”, of “want[ing] to be one civilization ahead of this one” (DeLillo 2012: 152). However, the receding of the Towers and Packer’s struggle with referentiality are also a literary transposition of the post-structuralist condition of sign, structure, and discourse that Jacques Derrida theorizes in his book *Writing and Difference* (1967). Derrida explains that with language structuralism we envisioned the existence of a structure, which consequently implies a center that both governs it and—contradictorily—escapes structurality. This center was initially understood as the locus or point of origin where the substitution of contents, elements and terms is forbidden and it has in the Western tradition been referred to as the ultimate transcendental signifier, which means “an invariable presence—eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (Derrida 1978: 280). The discovery, with structuralism, that this center, and therefore the transcendental signified, was not *within* the structure but *outside* of it allows for the free play of substitutions of meanings because “in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (Derrida 1978: 280) leading to a surplus availability of meaning. It is precisely this process of play and substitutions that Packer is enacting with his thoughts. Derrida uses the example of Levi-Strauss’s approach to ethnography to show how the use of substitutions can be useful to keep certain old concepts but at the same time admit their limits and allow for their sub-

stitutions once they become obsolete (Derrida 1978: 284-285). Similarly, in Packer's technocratic world, the available signifiers—sometimes together with their signifieds—are ready to be discarded as obsolete and be replaced with new ones—which he fails to identify, however. It could be argued that Packer somehow registers the surplus availability of meaning but is unable to elaborate it in a functional manner, for example by approaching it critically and coming up with useful substitutions to the signifiers he finds obsolete. Eric can only diagnose the problem but is utterly helpless as to how to resolve it, thus possibly embodying—albeit anachronistically—the sense of confusion caused by 9/11. Interestingly enough, Derrida traces back the starting point of the “infinite number of sign-substitutions” (Derrida 1978: 280) to an unspecified event, which he also calls “disruption” or “rupture”. It would not be a stretch, then, to imagine that Eric's attitude of always thinking forward makes him perceptive enough to sense the nearing of this event—the “ka-boom”. This is represented in the novel both physically, through Eric's own death, and metaphorically and linguistically, by the falling of the Towers—embodied by Packer himself—and the obsolescence of signifiers.

As Packer immerses himself completely in the stream of data, his persona works as a central nervous system that controls every form of technology around him. A few years after starting out his own business of prediction of the market's ebbs and flows, his wealth begins to grow exponentially allowing him to obtain almost anything that is technologically possible, so that he becomes “fused with Technology itself, particularly the technologies of cybernetics and microprocessing that represent the cutting-edge developments of his particular historical era” (Laist 2010: 259). Therefore, his ability to read any kind of information and absorb it helps him develop an accrued sensitivity of the world as an abstract entity because all the things that happen are mediated via screens, watches, and computers:

In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (DeLillo 2012: 24)

Even his own heart feels different, more alive even, when it is projected on the screen while the doctor is doing an echocardiogram. A sublimation occurs from the rough and flawed reality of the heart to the cleansed absolute truth of its cyber version: “the image was only a foot away but the heart assumed another context, one of distance and immensity, beating in the blood plum ruptures of a galaxy in formation. [...] How dwarfed he felt by his own heart” (DeLillo 2012: 44). Indeed, the description of Eric's heart that assumes new life through the screen seems to echo Baudrillard's words when he defines the media as “a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal, just as the other micromolecular code [the DNA] controls the passage from a representative sphere of meaning to the genetic one of programming signal” (Baudrillard 1994: 30). The dichotomy between technological idealism and mundane materialism finds its ultimate synthesis in the sleek white limousine that functions as a lens filtering data from the outside and pouring it on the pulsating flashes of the plasma screens on the inside. From its first appearance, the car is described as a “platonic replica, weightless for all its size, less an object than an idea,” but Eric himself is aware of its double nature when he admits that “he wanted the car because it was not only oversized but aggressively and contemptuously so, metastasizingly so, a tremendous mutant thing that stood astride every argument against it” (DeLillo 2012: 10). It has, therefore, a cancerous quality that eats at the outside to constantly grow in connection with its host who is trying to shut himself out from the crass bustling city life, proudly confessing that he had to “proust it, cork-line it against street noise” (DeLillo 2012: 70). The limo, moreover, lives as a whole mi-

crocosm revolving around Packer with its ceiling mural “that showed the arrangement of the planets at the time of his birth, calculated to the hour, minute and second” (DeLillo 2012: 179).

Ensnared in this avant-garde limo, Eric is almost a biological extension of his environment since the border between the two realms of technology and humanity has become invisible. The limo is a place where “the context was almost touchless. He could talk most of the system into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank” (DeLillo 2012: 13). The limousine is no longer even a medium to the outside world but “it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real” (Baudrillard 1994: 30). It is so intangible and diffused that Eric identifies with the technological apparatus thus also echoing Baudrillard’s theorization of the functionalism of both the machines and language, which act as relays or extensions of the organic body of man. Being technology, therefore, an extension of the human organism, it allows for it “to be equal to nature and to invest triumphally in nature” (Baudrillard 1994: 111). The overlapping of Eric and the limo, of subject and object, of nature and technology, creates a form of solipsism. Within it, Eric seemingly re-collects regardless of moral and ethical obligations. Plunged in what Varsava defines “*self sphere*” (Varsava 2005: 84), Packer feels free to orchestrate his own plots and schemes with little regard for the consequences. When one of his many lovers, art-dealer Didi Fancher, suggests that there is a Rothko painting he may be interested in, he eagerly investigates over the whole Rothko chapel<sup>2</sup> and claims that he wants to buy it. At Fancher’s protestation that it “belongs to the world”, Packer crudely snaps that “it’s mine if I buy it” (DeLillo 2012: 28). He expresses himself in any way he sees fit, single-handedly enacting a refrain that echoes throughout the novel, “let it express itself”: he beats the pastry assassin who wanted to hit him in the face with a pie, because “it felt great, it stung, it was quick and hot,” (143) he asks his bodyguard to shoot him with a stun gun, he makes the global stock market tumble on a whim, and, ultimately, he kills his own “chief of security” because his death would “clear the night for deeper confrontation” (DeLillo 2012: 147).

### 3.2. *The Aestheticism of Rogue Capitalism*

In *Cosmopolis*, violence is the foremost method of self-expression, providing immediate regeneration and contributing to the shaping of Eric as a rogue capitalist. Varsava explains that “rogue capitalism is that subspecies of capitalism that seeks special advantage and unfair profit” and that “greed, social prestige, and often obscure forms of gratification serve as catalysts for the misconduct of the rogue capitalist” (Varsava 2005: 79). Renouncing a collective historical consciousness, he places himself out of time where his actions cannot be judged by common moral grounds. His unredeemable megalomania makes him bigger than life—he functions with four or five nights a week of no-sleep, he reads poetry and Einstein’s theory of relativity while lying in bed and, as he thinks of death, he believes that “when he died he would not end, the world would end” (DeLillo 2012: 6). There is nothing to pity about this character since he has no detectable vulnerabilities: he is young, brilliant, rich, healthy, and handsome, and has no regard for others. DeLillo’s description of Eric qualifies him thus as the perfect embodiment of the Kierkegaardian aesthete, someone with “outstanding intellectual gifts”, who is also “witty, ironic, a dialectician, experienced in pleasure, [that] can calculate the instant, [that is] sentimental, heartless, all depend-

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<sup>2</sup> The Rothko Chapel is situated in Houston, Texas and is an interfaith sanctuary, i.e., a holy place of private prayer open to all religions. Its interior is considered a work of modern art because fourteen dark-hued canvases by the Russian-born American painter Mark Rothko are hung on its walls.



ing on the circumstances,” and, most importantly, someone who is “all the time only in the moment, [whose] life therefore disintegrates and it is impossible for [him] to explain” (Kierkegaard 2004: 493). And indeed, these are all qualities that Eric comes to embody at different stages of the novel, “all depending on the circumstances”.

In a chapter of his 1843 work *Either/Or* entitled “Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality”, Søren Kierkegaard explains—in the guise of a letter to a friend—the main traits that characterize the aesthetic life-view in contrast with the ethical one, and then exhorts his friend to *doubt, despair, and choose* the absolute either/or, *i.e.*, the choice between good and evil, which is “absolutely ethical” (Kierkegaard 2004: 485). This choice would grant his friend, and the eventual reader, “a harmony, [...] a solemnity, a quiet dignity that is never entirely lost [and that] makes a man greater than the angels” (Kierkegaard 1994: 490). However, Eric Packer falls undoubtedly in the aesthete category, for instance because at the opposite side of his vainglorious drive for predominance, there is a hollowness that cannot be filled—the price Eric pays for his success is the undeniable lack of sincere humanity, the inability to understand the people around him. He barely recognizes his wife, Elise Shifrin, when she passes by in a cab next to his limo and, after a brief exchange, it becomes evident that their marriage is nothing but a charade and the two have nothing in common, except for a thick bank account. Moreover, Elise’s money and beauty lose value during the day, as Eric bets and loses also using her money, and he reasons on the premises that brought them together during their encounter in the library: “She was rich, he was rich; she was heir-apparent, he was self-made; she was cultured, he was ruthless; she was brittle, he was strong; she was gifted, he was brilliant; she was beautiful. This was the core of their understanding, the thing they needed to believe before they could be a couple” (DeLillo 2012: 72). However, Eric finds all this meaningless, a sort of fabrication, when he confesses that, in hyperreal fashion, “[Elise and himself] invented her beauty together, conspiring to assemble a fiction that worked to their mutual manoeuvrability and delight” (DeLillo 2012: 72). The lack of meaning of beauty or youth is also registered by Kierkegaard among the main faults of the aesthete: “She perhaps has the gift of beauty, yet for him this is of no importance [...]; maybe she has the joyful disposition of youth, yet for him this joy has no meaning” (Kierkegaard 2004: 512). On his way to the haircut, Eric has sexual encounters with other women. However, as soon as these women leave his sight, he forgets all about them and the momentary pleasure he has just gained, returning then to his apathetic state. This also belongs to the sphere of the aesthetic life-view, finding its correspondence in Kierkegaard’s words when he explains to his friend that the aesthete “grabs at pleasure, all the world’s ingenuity must think up new pleasures for him, for it is only in the moment of pleasure he finds peace, and when it is over he yawns in ennui” (Kierkegaard 2004: 498). The boredom that Eric feels stems from his inability to open up with these women past the immediacy of the momentary sexual tension or physical pain, but “he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the unhappiest of all” (Kierkegaard 2004: 480).

The only time a conversation does not look like alternating monologues is when Eric meets his “chief of theory”, Vija Kinski, a philosophical guru whom Eric thinks of as “a voice with a body as afterthought” (DeLillo 2012: 104). Vija represents almost a hyperreal/platonic idea, a thought so pure that remains intangible and so far removed from reality, and that it is therefore either the ultimate essence of it (or a platonic idea) or the ultimate *simulacrum* overwriting reality (and thus hyperreal). Kinski offers a pause that allows for recollection from Eric’s megalomaniac hunger for control, his constant looking for “techniques of charting that [predict] the movements of money itself” (DeLillo 2012: 75)—something which can also be perfectly aligned with the typical aesthete who wishes for nothing, except for “a divining-rod which could give [him] everything, and then [he] would use it for scraping out [his] pipe” (Kierkegaard 2004: 507). Kinski starts her discussion with Aristotle’s word “*chrematistikōs*”, “the art of money-making”, labeling with this

term Packer's reproduction of money from money in the stock market and distinguishing it from "oikonomia", *i.e.*, the management of the household or of a community to increase its potential natural value for all members. In Aristotle's *Politics*, interest was deemed an illegitimate abomination of wealth and condemned as unnatural because it is only aimed at profit without regard to need. Aaron Chandler explains that, according to Aristotle, "chrematistike, a technique solely concerned with the infinite acquisition of wealth, must be inferior to oikonomia, a discipline based on the needs of its constituent players and what is naturally available to them" (Chandler 2009: 246). Therefore, Eric gets caught in a contradiction when he bets against the yen firmly believing that it will eventually fall, because he assigns to the stock market a sort of intrinsic predictability and natural pattern that cannot belong to it, whereas Kinski goes on warning him that "it's all random phenomena," and he should not consider "foreseeable trends and forces" or "apply mathematics and other disciplines" in his analysis because he is "dealing with a system that's out of control. Hysteria at high speed, day to day, minute to minute. [...] We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over" (DeLillo 2012: 85).

The "frenzy" Vija talks about is due to the non-stop functioning of the market that seems to have conquered time turning it into "a corporate asset" and, since her job is to theorize, she is the only character who explicitly admits what was latent since the beginning of the novel: the fact that "a new theory of time" is in order now that "the past is disappearing" (DeLillo 2012: 86). As a currency trader, Packer's work is never-ending, and the 24/7 delirium of the global stock market seems to be reason enough for his insomnia. DeLillo makes sure to involve the reader in this quest for a new conception of time marking the diurnal course only through shifting labels in the now (like "a minute ago", "a week ago", "a minute later", "dawn", "twilight") or references to the streets the limo is crossing, but the effects of this temporal alienation are way more serious. The commodification of time has caused "money [to lose] its narrative quality" (DeLillo 2012: 77) because, as Victor Li puts it, "the different temporal rhythms of the world have either been decontextualized, abstracted, and simplified into 'fixed digits' [...] or converted into so many fleeting fractions, decimals, and symbols that make sense only to stock brokers and currency traders" (Li 2016: 261). Since both money and time have moved to the *hyperreal*—which is forcibly overwriting their traditional meaning—, the sense of loss for these commodities leads to a state of disavowal because "the most insignificant of our behaviors is regulated by neutralized, indifferent, equivalent signs, by zero-sum signs like those that regulate the 'strategy of games'" (Baudrillard 1994: 32). It is precisely this state of disavowal that people are trying to spread through a street demonstration that seems to prophesize the encampments and occupations of the 2011 populist movement *Occupy Wall Street*. However, the protesters Eric finds in Times Square while in his limo with Vija are smashing windows, tossing smoke bombs at the cops, spraying graffiti on displays in their physical quest for time because "time, like money, is everywhere. It is supremely available, but, by virtue of such availability, it is untouchable and undiscoverable" (Boxall 2006, 224).

However, after witnessing the spectacle of sheer destruction offered by the protesters, Packer does not sympathize with their plights but only feels reinvigorated, and he immediately wakes to a new resolution. The recurrent warnings of Eric's "chief of security" concerning a death threat are now giving his life a new meaning: he will not resist his fate like the protesters did; on the contrary, he will run towards it and bring the global market down with him. Moreover, his exchange with Kinski makes him question his certainties and confess for the first time that he has *doubts* about the manageability of the market. While acknowledging that it is becoming elusive for him, he admits that he has been "working on it, sleeping on it, not sleeping on it", leaving his "chief of theory" worried, since he never believed in doubt, he believed that "computer power eliminates doubt" (DeLillo 2012: 86). This represents the first crack in Eric's façade: he finally sees that the

greater picture is escaping him since he only lives in the immediacy of the moment and, therefore, “his knowing is confined constantly to a certain relativity, within a certain boundary” (Kierkegaard 2004: 492). Kierkegaard explains that *doubt* is the first step to exit the aesthetic life-view, but since doubt is only “a despair of thought”, it is not enough for Eric. In order to really move to the stage of the ethical life-view, it is necessary for him—and for any aesthete—to embrace despair, which is “a doubt of the personality” (Kierkegaard 2004: 514) which will show him that he is not choosing himself and the absolute. Eric, however, is unable to grasp the meaning of life because he remains only in the doubt of thought, “in the affinity between market movements and natural world” (DeLillo 2012: 86) which he does not understand, and this doubt is clearly insufficient to allow for actual despair. Eric’s fault, it would then seem, is that his “thought has hurried on ahead, [he has] seen through the vanity of everything but [he has] not come any further” (Kierkegaard 2004: 503) and it is precisely his inability to despair that will be his downfall.

### 3.3. Moving Deathward

The spycam in Eric’s limousine is one of the many digital wonders he owns and, as the day goes by, he realizes that it shows things that have not happened yet: “He knew the spycam operated in real time, or was supposed to. How could he see himself if his eyes were closed? There wasn’t time to analyze. He felt his body catching up to the independent image” (DeLillo 2012: 52). After being reassured by his “chief of technology” that there was nothing amiss with the spycam, his muse Vija, echoing DeLillo’s words in “In the Ruins of The Future”, clarifies that “technology makes our fate” (DeLillo 2012: 95) and, therefore, the digital image, more glowing and manifest than a real person, is always one step ahead in the rush towards the future. Cybernetics are endowed with such a hyperreal prospective thrust that “in Eric’s world, fate belongs not to human beings, but to technologies. Rather than enabling you to seize your future, technology is the future that seizes you” (Laist 2010, 269). Since these digital images are removed from a homogeneous and linear temporal frame, they have the power to defeat death, resurrecting and perpetuating anyone in the ever-flowing data stream. This is what happens to Arthur Rapp, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, who gets “killed live on the Money Channel” (DeLillo 2012: 33) during an interview in North Korea. The images of his assassination are obsessively flooding the screens in front of Eric satisfying the popular demand for violence and, most importantly, offering to human beings a way to escape death. This clearly reflects Baudrillard’s words when he states that “it is now the era of murder by simulation, of the generalized aesthetic of simulation, of the murder-alibi—the allegorical resurrection of death” (Baudrillard 1994: 24) because the event is nothing but a gigantic simulation that turns then into a simulacrum, *i.e.*, it is no longer exchanged for the real, only for itself in an uninterrupted circuit without reference. Being herself a visionary, Kinski has obviously already envisioned a near future where people can make a definitive conversion into digital bits: “Why die when you can live on a disk? A disk, not a tomb. An idea beyond the body. A mind that’s everything you ever were and will be, but never weary or confused or impaired. [...] Will it happen someday? [...] Maybe today is the day that everything happens, for better or worse, ka-boom, like that” (DeLillo 2012: 106). The ominous “ka-boom” that is bound to happen hours later will completely eradicate any Faustian hope for immortality, but Eric did not fall short of dreaming big even of his own demise. He imagines his bodyguard and lover, Kendra Hayes, “embalming” him like an Egyptian pharaoh, then he decides that his remains will be “solarized” with the help of his plane, a nuclear bomber, that would have to be flown with his embalmed body by remote control “reaching maximum altitude and leveling at supersonic dash speed and then sent plunging into the sand, fireballed one and all, leaving a work of land art”

(DeLillo 2012: 209). Eric's likening of himself to an embalmed Egyptian pharaoh refers allegorically to his—and extensively to the US—quest for the mastery over life, putrefaction, and over the complete cycle of life and death. A quest that is, according to Baudrillard, the obvious consequence of the search for meaning in the unraveling of the secrets of our past, so that it becomes visible. Embalming originally represented a mythical effort to immortalize a hidden dimension that preceded and followed, and so our attempts to decode it or simulate it highlights the need to rely on “a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end” (Baudrillard 2004: 10). It is because of this attempt at mastering death that Eric is condemned by his own narcissism and hubris to commit an act of self-destruction.

After the protest, and reinvigorated by “the threat of death”, Eric begins “the business of living” (DeLillo 2012: 107). While his actions get more and more reckless by the minute as he approaches the coveted barbershop, the “credible threat” frees him from his restraints and implicitly condones any misconduct. The way in which DeLillo addresses this “credible threat”—which will turn out to be nothing but a phone call—echoes the system of deterrence put in place by the atomic threat that paralyzes our lives, what Baudrillard defines as “the apotheosis of simulation” (Baudrillard 1994: 32). The risk of nuclear annihilation only works, according to Baudrillard, as a pretext for the installation of a universal security system, something that is already in place in *Cosmopolis*, since Eric rides in a bulletproof limo and has a personal “chief of security” that follows him around to protect him at all times. However, Eric gets rid of his limo and kills the “chief of security” to confront the credible threat directly, thus eliminating the security system around him. It is paramount to notice that his clear resolution to rush towards death is not unencumbered by emotional instability because *doubt* and introspection start to insinuate his once pragmatic and desensitized mind. According to Kierkegaard, “everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not” (Kierkegaard 2004: 502), and once it is acknowledged and understood, the aesthete would immediately recognize that there needs to be a higher form of existence. Nevertheless, the only way to access this higher form at this point would be to embrace the despair from which the ethical emerges. Will Eric be able to do so? He himself confesses to Elise, his wife of 22 days, that he is somehow “making a change”, feeling that what is important now for him is “to be aware of what's around me. To understand another person's situation, another person's feelings. To know, in short, what's important” (DeLillo 2012: 121). Moreover, we soon discover that the reason why Packer was so hell-bent on going crosstown just to get the infamous haircut is his affinity with the barber: a family friend who will recount him again the tale of his father's passing. While sitting on one of the swivel chairs, Eric feels a sudden bout of sleep coming and he becomes less god-like and more human, less cunning and more trusting so much that “he told them about the credible threat. He confided in them. It felt good to trust someone. [...] This is where he felt safe” (DeLillo 2012: 166). It is after this revelation that comforts him and allows him to retreat in a womb-like environment that Eric abruptly decides to leave and go look for the person who is threatening him.

With this resolution, Eric is ready to face the man behind the threat and he enters a seemingly abandoned building after hearing several gun shots. Once he realizes where the noises are coming from, Packer kicks the door in a Hollywood fashion to forcefully open it and starts shooting in the room. The man he finds in the apartment looks like a shabby hobo and is contiguous with the neglected ambience made of objects recovered from the trash and collected over the years, things like “a shredded sofa, unoccupied, with a stationary bike nearby, [...] the remains of a kitchen and bathroom” (DeLillo 2012: 186). A former currency analyst, Benno Levin used to work for Eric until he started to feel helpless in the micro-timed system of the global market. Engaging in a philosophical confrontation, Benno reveals to Eric that his actual name is Richard Sheets, so both their names share the same Germanic root “ric”, meaning “power, ruler”, and hence the killer is

nothing but a double—a mental projection that allows the protagonist to face his fantasies of self-destruction. The structure of the novel itself strengthens this interpretation because the book is split in two parts, with two chapters each, and two interludes called “The Confessions of Benno Levin”, one in each part. The two interludes are set in the same day but follow a non-linear chronology: in the first one, subtitled “night”, Benno describes Eric’s corpse after his death and in the second one, subtitled “morning”, he expresses his intentions to kill him later in the day. Russel Scott Valentino suggests that “the mirror-like organization, which seems to circle in on itself, is only one of many indicators that, despite its bodily paraphernalia, what we are reading is a kind of *psychomachia*, or battle for the mind” (Valentino 2007: 152). When Benno recognizes that the reason why Eric is so hard-headed about his mission is his megalomania—his being of “supernatural size” (Kierkegaard 2004: 505)—he tries to show him that “even when you self-destruct, you want to fail more, lose more, die more than others, stink more than others. In the old tribes the chief who destroyed more of his property than the other chiefs was the more powerful” (DeLillo 2012: 194). The mentioning of a tribal, pre-capitalistic structure in this battle of the self can be explained through Baudrillard’s view of war as the fight between “two adversaries [who] are fundamentally in solidarity against something else, [*i.e.*] tribal, communitarian, precapitalist structures, every form of exchange, of language, of symbolic organization that [...] must be abolished” (Baudrillard 1994: 37). And so, this showdown is nothing but an allegorical war where the two parts—which are actually one—are condemning the precapitalist world of exchange and symbols to oblivion, making the ultimate conversion to the digital bits of the hyperreal and rogue capitalism. The two parts are so interconnected through their thoughts and their actions that, when Eric suddenly decides to shoot himself in the hand, the narrator needs to clear the confusion caused by the masculine pronoun, similarly to what happens in *Falling Man* when the plots of Hammad and Keith converge to a single point:

He pressed the muzzle of his gun, Eric did, against the palm of his left hand. He tried to think clearly. He thought of his chief of security flat on the asphalt, a second yet left in his life. He thought of others down the years, hazy and nameless. He felt an enormous remorseful awareness. It moved through him, called guilt, and strange how soft the trigger felt against his finger. (DeLillo 2012: 196)

While the hole in his hand tethers him to the then and there of the ephemeral human immanence, Eric confesses to his doppelgänger that he has an asymmetrical prostate—another feature that the two shares—, and Benno scolds him for not understanding that he was bearing the solution to his *doubt* all along. Eric’s faith in money started crumbling when he could not chart the yen movements through patterns from nature, but the conundrum is that those patterns are not absolute in nature: in his analysis he forgot “the importance of the lopsided, the thing that’s skewed a little” (DeLillo 2012: 200). This kind of imperfection could never be converted into the general “zero-oneness”, it is simply “untransferable”, and Eric is able to understand this fact only through pain—his body is the ultimate counter-currency in a world of ratios, indexes, digits, and flowing information. The struggle between the physical decay and the ethereal bliss of the data stream is metaphorically expressed also by the epigraph of the novel: “a rat became the unit of currency”, a line from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem, “Report from the Besieged City” (1983). Comparing the grip of technological advancement and capitalism on New York City to the horrors of a totalitarian system in Warsaw, DeLillo might advocate the desperate need to steer toward a global policy concerned more about humanity and less about commodities. By the end of the novel, it seems that Eric’s often despicable behavior could be excused if not anchored to the immediate result but to the greater good. In order to offer the world a clean slate by demolishing the trade market from within, he is determined “to get a haircut”, an expression which in financial slang means “taking

a loss”, and he is willingly being stripped of his clothes one item at a time, causing him to be “naked”, a term used when someone has not protected himself against mistakes with other investments, and has ultimately become a sacrificial victim—Christian stigma in his hand and all—whose end makes for a global rebirth.

While this optimistic analysis would redeem Eric in the very end, if one looks at the final pages of the novel using Kierkegaard’s lens, Eric remains nothing but an unapologetic aesthete that could not manage to embrace the despair, choose the either/or—and therefore good—and waited, instead, for someone to make the choice for him. Kierkegaard explains the aesthetic plunge towards suicide as a daily occurrence for someone like Eric who struggles to see past the immediacy of the moment and already imagines himself fluctuating eternally in the stream of data: “You are like someone dying, you die daily, not in the profound, serious sense in which one usually takes the word, but life has lost its reality and ‘you always reckon your lifetime from one day’s notice to quit the next’” (Kierkegaard 2004: 503). Since this immediacy permeates the aesthete’s life, he cannot truly envision death as something permanent, but only as the jumping from one moment onto the next one. Thus, his suicide attempt does not come with a desire to do away with his self, but only because he “wishes he had another form of his self, and [...] convinced in the highest degree of the immortality of the soul [...], he thought to find in this way the absolute form of the spirit” (Kierkegaard 2004: 517). By killing himself, the aesthete hopes that “his inmost being were an algebraic entity that could stand for whatever it might be” (Kierkegaard 2004: 517) and this is precisely what Eric believes even after the killing shot has sounded, that he would continue living “in a chip, as a disk, as data, in a whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from the void” (DeLillo 2012: 206).

DeLillo does not wallow in the scene of the actual killing: it is through Benno’s journal that the reader knows he pulled the trigger and Eric is dead. The novel ends after Eric’s unique wrist-watch has displayed its powers of clairvoyance to reveal a corpse labeled “Male Z” on the metal slab of a morgue, but there is of course a deferral between the possibility of death and death as a fact. Indeed, Eric is “dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound” (DeLillo 2012: 209), living in a transitional space of pure potential where the action has not been completely perfected, not performing what Boxall defines “a quantum hop”—a transition from one state to another (Boxall 2006: 232). It is as if Eric is now balancing himself “on the tip of the moment of choice” (Kierkegaard 2004: 482) where he could finally choose himself—and, therefore, the either/or—but he hesitates to make this choice and so, someone else makes it for him, in this case Benno. Kierkegaard exhorts his friend to choose immediately “because there is a danger afoot that at the next moment it may not be in [his] power to make the same choice, that something has already been lived that must be lived over again” (Kierkegaard 2004: 483) and it is through this temporal frame that the parallelisms with Eric’s experience become evident because as he is waiting to choose, Benno kills him thus taking the possibility from him. He sees himself in the watch while the power of time “detains the spiritual embrace in which he grasps himself. He has not chosen himself; like Narcissus he has fallen in love with himself” (Kierkegaard 2004: 529) imagining a perfect form of life for his future self. The spiritual yearning for a confirmation of a transcendent realm that is sought out throughout the novel is paradoxically overcome by an acceptance of the body as a living organism when Eric is struck with an epiphany about human transience, and blurts “Oh shit I’m dead”. While Eric’s research turns out to be misguided and not fruitful in the end, his tension towards a higher form of existence is justified by his unresolved melancholy. Eric’s evolution throughout the novel—both in the regenerative power of violence and in the re-evaluation of personal points of reference—remains linked to the plane of aestheticism, and, because of his stubbornness and unapologetic attitude, he is unable to see the

faults in his reasoning till the very end, thus failing to fully embrace personal despair and move to the ethical stage. Even while rushing to his death, he is “enjoy[ing him]self in constantly disregarding the conditions” (Kierkegaard 2004: 500), and his desire for death is only driven by sheer vanity. However, towards the end he does manage to recognize the existence of the *doubt* and he is slowly and anxiously corroded by it. Kierkegaard explains that the insinuation of doubt arises “when immediacy is as though ripened and when the spirit demands a higher form in which it will apprehend itself as spirit” (Kierkegaard 2004: 499). The search of the spirit for eternal validity leads then to a state of melancholy, which is what Eric is trying to act upon in the last part of the novel reforming his views “to know, in short, what’s important” (DeLillo 2012: 121). Nevertheless, the scratch remained only on the surface and his “despair of thought” was not deep enough to provide access to the next stage: the ethical life-view.

#### 4. The Ethical Awakening

##### 4.1. Dealing with “the Days After”

*Falling Man* tosses the reader on the site immediately after the attack while “smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke with office paper flashing past, [...] otherworldly things in the morning pall” (DeLillo 2008: 3). The vivid image of the office paper that falls is representative of the gothic decay that permeates the first chapter of the novel. Out of the ashes, Keith Neudecker comes forward, briefcase in one hand, splinters of glass in his face, covered in blood, ashes, and slag, and walks inside his old apartment where his estranged wife Lianne still lives. The two had been separated for over a year, but when he surprisingly turns out at the apartment, Lianne takes care of him, brings him to the hospital, and then he moves back with her and their son, Justin: the fall of the towers is then a tragic, yet powerful event that manages to make everything fall back into place.

But this is a DeLillo novel, therefore it cannot simply be a story of redemption. Keith was a lawyer in the North Tower who, after separating from his wife, got a small apartment nearby where he used to play poker with his friends once a week. This “steadfast commitment” (DeLillo 2008: 35) was the only reference point in a life otherwise in shambles; after the attack, this tradition cannot just resume because Rumsey, one of the players and the protagonist’s closest friend, died in the crash. Keith is battered and the shockwave that hit him during the impact leaves him like “a hovering presence” (DeLillo 2008: 74), watching himself going over the exercises that the therapist prescribed to mend the torn cartilage in his wrist. Although he tries to cope with the events and readjust to his new circumstances, he cannot help but feel misplaced, over-analyzing every minute, anxious of his surroundings, “drifting into spells of reflection, thinking not in clear units, hard and linked, but only absorbing what comes” (DeLillo 2008: 83). Keith’s state also bears a similarity with the Kierkegaardian aesthete that is “always hovering above [him]self, but the higher ether [...] is the nothing of despair and [he] see[s] below [him] a multitude of area of learning, insight, study, observation which for [him], though, have no reality” (Kierkegaard 2004: 504). The moot, yet only solution he seems to find at the end of the novel is investing all this despair in the world of professional poker tournament and casinos in Vegas, as ominously promised by his very name. DeLillo, indeed, foreshadows the character’s destiny thus relying on the old belief of nominative determinism. Keith Neudecker’s family name contains the German root *neu-* which stands for “new” and *-decker* as in “card deck”—he was ready to play whenever a new deck rose to the table. Gambling is an activity that Kierkegaard connects with the immediacy of the aesthetic life-view because while gambling, “desire is aroused with all its passion, it is as though his life were at stake

if the desire is not satisfied” (Kierkegaard 2004:528). While the danger is in this case only make-believe, it still allows the aesthete to postpone the moment of choosing, leaving the possibility of a “cure” to another time.

Similarly, Keith’s best friend Rumsey, who died in the towers, has many obsessions and psychoses that also affect Eric’s behavior in *Cosmopolis*, thus possibly classifying him as yet another aesthete. During a flashback, Keith remembers when Rumsey confessed that he “had compulsions”, and the detailed description that follows paints Rumsey as a control-freak capitalist who could barely keep the head above the water of his paranoia: “He memorized things that crossed his consciousness, streams of information, more or less willingly. He could recite the personal data of a couple dozen friends and acquaintances, addresses, phone numbers, birthdays. Months after the file of a random client crossed his desk, he could tell you the man’s mother’s maiden name” (DeLillo 2008: 152). Just like Eric’s job was to “acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful” (DeLillo 2012: 19), Rumsey seems dedicated to knowing and counting everything around him in his attempt to apply a finite quality to a world of fathomless possibilities. Nevertheless, he admits that he would be cured of his obsession the day he would find a woman with nine toes instead of ten because that would imply that there was no way of rationalizing the mundane horizontal plane of existence—he could only accept it as it was. In their compulsive and instinctive chase of “the thing that’s skewed a little” (DeLillo 2012: 200), Rumsey and Eric are kindred spirits who share the same fate: death. When Eric is accused of living “in a tower that soars to heaven and goes unpunished by God” (DeLillo 2012: 103), Rumsey is the one paying the consequences of such arrogance falling victim to the onslaught of 9/11. Curiously enough, another fellow player of Keith, Terry Cheng, is also “stacking chips of different colors and varying denominations in two columns or two sets of columns. He did not want columns so high they might topple” (DeLillo 2008: 162) and, in this case, the association of the falling towers with gambling inevitably springs to mind. It is as if Keith is now staging—and attempting to control—what used to be his previous occupation, *i.e.*, the routine of money-making in the game of capitalism.

The “easing inward” (DeLillo 2008: 83) that Keith experiences after surviving the attack is what has characterized his wife Lianne, a free-lance book editor, for her whole life. Lianne “wanted to absorb everything, childlike, [...] whatever she could breathe in from other people’s pores” (DeLillo 2008: 133). Linda Kauffman defines this ability as “Keats’s Negative Capability”, which means the ability to abandon one’s own personality and consequently enter the subjectivity of another person or thing, like Keats describes in the process of imagining the nightingale or the Grecian urn (Kauffmann 2011: 136). This ability is also what helps her rationalize when she edits books: at the beginning of the novel, we find her working on a book “on ancient alphabets” by a “Bulgarian [who was] writing in English” (DeLillo 2008: 27). Dissecting language through her work as book editor seems to be a means of processing her own thoughts, the environment, and find focus. The ability to put oneself in relation with the “outside” and find focus is something that Kierkegaard considers integral part of the ethical life-view, albeit he calls it *mood*, *i.e.*, the “personal existence in its relation to the environment” (Kierkegaard 2004: 527). Someone who lives ethically constantly strives for mastery over the mood, being able to seize it up only for an instant and thus gaining absolute control over oneself. It would then seem that Lianne, through language, manages to grasp herself, the environment, and consequently feel safe. Genetics is another reason why she is haunted by language: her father shot himself after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and now, in order to move forward, she holds systematic sessions with a group of patients in the early stages of the disease to help them retain words. These people, whose full name is presented in an abbreviated form (*e.g.*, Rosellen S., Benny T., Omar H., Carmen G., Eugene A.) evoking a Kafkaesque struggle for their own identity, “were the living breath of the thing



that killed her father” (DeLillo 2008: 77) and she is constantly watching herself, always questioning her memory, fearing the day the disease will take a hold on her, as well.

Another character who has a confrontation with the poignancy of words is the Neudeckers’ seven-year-old son, Justin, who starts speaking in monosyllables because of an experiment in his class, “a serious game about the structure of words and the discipline required to frame clear thoughts” (DeLillo 2008: 83). His parents will never know if this was an actual school game or a different kind of metabolizing process after the trauma of 9/11 as he moves to the next step of his “spiritual development”, “utter and unbreakable silence” (DeLillo 2008: 127). However, Justin’s search for the “structure of words” brings us back to the lack of a centered structure and the different way of thinking about the ontological dimension of signs that Derrida elaborates in *Writing and Difference*. The Neudeckers’ son seems to recognize that old concepts and signs no longer fit the post-9/11 world and he refrains from using language altogether. Instead of understanding that “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique”<sup>3</sup> (Derrida 1978: 284), he is unable to think critically about language and retreats in himself after only a few attempts<sup>4</sup> to become a *bricoleur*, which means in Derrida’s terms “someone who uses [...] the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used [...] to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary” (Derrida 1978: 285). It would seem, therefore, that the state of surplus availability of meaning leads, paradoxically, to a sterile retreat where nothing can be expressed anymore. Moreover, the idea of a centered structure is, according to Derrida, nothing but “a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude” (Derrida 1978: 279) and through this play of signification anxiety can be mastered because of this certitude. Anxiety rises, instead, when one is implicated in the game and caught by it, especially once the transcendental signified is absent and the play of signification is extended infinitely. So, while living in a reality where “everything seemed to mean something” (DeLillo 2008: 84) and there is supplementarity (surplus availability of meaning) in the absence of an original transcendental signified, Justin’s play is, if anything, a refusal to engage in the play of signification and thus he is relieved from the anxiety that comes from the infinite substitutions/repetitions/transformations/permutations (Derrida 1978: 279).

Every character in the novel is, at least metaphorically, “falling” whether it is due to a lost sense of direction, a stinging memory from the past, an exasperated search to fall into some routine or a shocking jump from a high building in a crowded place, everyone is in a lapsing state—as if metaphorically balancing themselves “on the tip of the moment of choice” (Kierkegaard 2004: 482). Nina Bartos’s—Lianne’s mother—decay, though, is in a way different from the others: it is a physical one. She is surrendering to the plight of old age, wearied by the chase of the events. In stark contrast with her illustrious academic past, Nina is often inscribed in the living room of her house “sit[ting] in an armchair” (DeLillo 2008: 41), and even her sporadic strolls to the Metropolitan Museum reflect the meditative turn her once-fretful life has now taken. Her relationship with Lianne is bumpy: being both opinionated, they often argue taking opposite sides and without reach-

<sup>3</sup> Like Derrida suggests when he describes the attempts made by Levi-Strauss in his book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1955) to think of signs as tools that are useful up to the point when they are no longer because they should be replaced by better ones, employing them in the meantime “to destroy the old machinery to which they belong” (Derrida 1978: 284).

<sup>4</sup> I will point out later in this article one of the passages where he attempts this *bricolage*.

ing a final understanding. Kauffman explains that Lianne “finds her mother rather intimidating. Far from being nurturing, motherhood seems to have been something of an afterthought for Nina” (Kauffman 2011: 147). Indeed, Lianne’s need to absorb everything finds a justification of sorts when—while pondering on her childhood—she rediscovers the contrasting sense of admiration and abandonment strongly connected to the outstanding academic life of her mother. Nina’s legacy in Lianne’s life remains, however, in the critical way she looks at and reads art, something that will become quite a lifeline for her.

#### **4.2. *Still Life and Möbius Strip***

After her husband’s suicide, Nina began a long-term relationship with art-dealer Martin Ridnour; he procured for her the two Morandi paintings hung in her living room and several old passport photos of migrants. Nina initiated him into aesthetics and showed him that paintings are more than just brushstrokes on canvasses:

“When we first knew each other I talked to him about Giorgio Morandi. Showed him a book. Beautiful still lifes. Form, color, depth. He was just getting started in the business and barely knew Morandi’s name. Went to Bologna to see the work firsthand. Came back saying no, no, no, no. Minor artist. Empty, self-involved, bourgeois. Basically, a Marxist critique, this is what Martin delivered.” (DeLillo 2008: 183)

Martin’s “Marxist critique” to the Morandi paintings was the first warning sign that should have alerted Nina about how his ideological positioning originated in a different philosophical tradition. Indeed, before meeting her, he belonged to Kommune 1, also known as K1—a student activist group and the first politically motivated commune in Germany, famous for their bizarre performance acts of social satire—founded in 1967 in West-Berlin by Dieter Kunzelmann. We are not privy to the role that Martin played in the K1’s activities; he could have been part of merely a support group but it seems enough to make Lianne suspicious, all of a sudden, of Martin’s involvement when she prods her mother saying that “maybe he killed someone” (DeLillo 2008: 185).

What we know is that Martin is supposedly “operating under a false name”—his real one being Ernst Hechinger—and that his point of view about 9/11 is overtly European. When he and Nina engage in a heated debate a few days after the attack, their words seem to echo the contrasting positions that DeLillo holds in his 2001 essay “In the Ruins of the Future”:

“One side has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the laws, the police and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die.”

“God is great,” she said.

“Forget God. These are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives and their consciousness.” (DeLillo 2008: 59)

So, whereas Nina considers terrorism a senseless “viral infection” (DeLillo 2008: 141), Martin understands that the jihadists were trying to “strike a blow to [America]’s dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies” (DeLillo 2008: 58). Moreover, in his take, Martin enlarges and narrows the focus of the matter at the same time, highlighting that “this is not an attack on one country, on one or two cities. All of us, we are targets now” (DeLillo 2008: 59) and thus this “fundamental antagonism” is past the “specter of America” and the “specter of Islam” battling each other, but points, instead, directly towards a “triumphant globalization [that] battle[s] against itself” (Baudrillard 2003: 11). This desire for

self-destruction that the technocratic world order of the US cradled in their arms also comes to the fore in Martin's words when he denounces that:

“Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason could there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down.” (DeLillo 2008: 146)

Moreover, Martin's antagonism towards the United States is so brazen that when he thinks about Keith, the only thing he recalls about him is that he owned a pit bull, “a dog that was all skull and jaws, an American breed, developed originally to fight and kill” (DeLillo 2008: 55), thus betraying once more his adverse attitude towards the US. Acknowledging this dichotomy, Kauffman affirms that “Nina's conflict with Hechinger thus highlights the contradictions between America's self-image and its image in the eyes of the world. Where she sees civilization, he sees brute force – police, prisons, and the military” (Kauffman 2010: 27).

However, the former barrenness of Martin's critique on Morandi's art gets dissolved due to Nina's influence, and he begins to see the Twin Towers in one of the still lifes hanging on the wall, applying a far-fetched political layer to the painting, a layer that Lianne immediately picks up on presumably because of her ability to absorb and scrutinize her surroundings. After an ekphrastic account of the painting, the outline of the towers is suddenly evident and recognizable to both her and the reader:

They looked together.

Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.

“What do you see?” he said.

She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (DeLillo 2008: 62)

Therefore, only in the aftermath of 9/11, they developed a deeper consciousness able to grasp such a frightful meaning. Julia Apitzsch explains that “it is not the paintings that have changed – it is the gaze of the beholders that transforms the still life into a somber *natura morta*” (Apitzsch 2010: 103). Through Martin's and Lianne's gaze, therefore, DeLillo wants the reader to witness how pervasive the shock after the event was, showing that the characters' perspective has irremediably changed and is only now allowing them to recognize the outline of the towers in a painting that they have seen many times before. However, it is Nina's experienced perspective of the painting that enlightens Lianne and helps her move even beyond 9/11 itself, directly to mortality. It is only after Lianne's mentioning of human transience that the conversation between the three—Lianne, Nina and Martin—moves from art to a profound analysis of geopolitical, social, and religious issues at play that brought and followed the attack leaving nothing but metaphorical and physical “ruins” (DeLillo 2008: 146).

Martin's European and Marxist perspective becomes even more evident when the reader discovers that he keeps a wanted poster of the 19 members (the same number of the jihadists on the planes) belonging to the Red Army Faction—a German far-left militant group founded in 1970 that started as a student protest movement and then resorted to bombings and assassinations becoming a straightforward terrorist organization—in his apartment in Berlin. Strangely enough, this is the only thing that reassures Lianne and Nina about his involvement with this other group: the fact that his face was not on the poster. Her mother and Martin eventually break up, after Nina realizes that “he thinks these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something in common

with the radicals of the sixties and the seventies. [...] They have their visions of world brotherhood” (DeLillo 2012: 185). Therefore, Nina insists on returning to him the Morandi paintings and his old passport photos before passing away. However, during his last exchange with Lianne and the other guests at Nina’s memorial service, the two clashing standpoints surface again when one of those guests emphasizes the centrality of America:

“If we occupy the center, it’s because you put us there. This is your true dilemma.” He said. “Despite everything, we’re still America, you’re still Europe. You go to our movies, read our books, listen to our music, speak our language. How can you stop thinking about us? You see us and hear us all the time. Ask yourself. What comes after America?”

Martin spoke quietly, almost idly, to himself.

“I don’t know this America anymore. I don’t recognize it,” he said. “There’s an empty space where America used to be.” (DeLillo 2008: 247)

The “empty space” that Martin identifies as America—which still considers itself placed at the center of the map—brings us back to Baudrillard’s hyperreal dimension. He opens *Simulacra and Simulation* mentioning the Borges’ short story in which the cartographers of the Empire created a map so detailed and in perfect scale that it managed to cover the exact territory of the empire itself, and then explains that this model has been now inverted and the territory itself is turned into an allegory. In present-day simulation, the territory has become nothing but “shreds [that] slowly rot across the extent of the map”, what he defines “*the desert of the real itself*” (italics not mine, Baudrillard 1994: 1). In this case, we might as well say *the desert of America itself* because Martin here is trying to elaborate, in the first place, the lack of referentiality between signified and signifier—“a liquidation of all referentials” (Baudrillard 1994: 2). He is also, however, highlighting the superimposition of an imagined, hyperreal America over what it actually is, or better yet is no longer since there is only “an empty space” where it once stood, with its Western ideals and sense of grandeur before 9/11. It can be therefore argued that, by stirring this debate and challenging the reader’s and America’s perspective with these passages, DeLillo shows that, while it was easy for Western society to slip into the old *Us vs Them* shibboleth and point the finger at another ethnic or religious group, all human beings are instead subject to “that (unwittingly) terroristic imagination which dwells in all of us” (Baudrillard 2003: 5). He confesses this shameful fault through Lianne’s thoughts over Martin: “Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her – one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white” (DeLillo 2008: 249).

The narrow-mindedness of Western culture towards otherness is strongly marked by the space given to another form of counter-narrative in the novel—the side-line story of Hammad, one of the terrorists on the planes. He stands as a synecdoche for all the 19 jihadists, but his path is not so easily mapped out as one would think because in the midst of his reversed *Bildung* which leads to a loss of individuality, he shows many times what Randall defines an “ontological insecurity” (Randall 2011: 123). In the few pages containing his inner development, he seems to struggle with an unconscious desire to be normal: he has a relationship with a Syrian girl in Hamburg, he has mixed feelings over the beard he was supposed to grow, and, when in Nokomis he sees a car skimming beside him with a bunch of “college kids” crammed in, his first instinct is not to kill them but to join them. However, whenever doubts rise, Amir<sup>5</sup> is ready to discard them with his puny

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<sup>5</sup> An abbreviated form for the name of one of the ringleaders of 9/11, Mohamed el-Amir Awad el-Sayed Atta.

philosophy of fate and destiny, and his exchanges with Hammad undeniably lack the dialectical spirit of the heated debates between Martin, Nina, and Lianne. However, Nina is right when she identifies the kinship that ties Martin to those terrorists because Hammad's words echo Martin's as he confesses in one of his inner monologues that "what [these people] hold so precious we see as empty space" (DeLillo 2008: 226). Hammad does not share similarities only with the European character in *Falling Man*. While sitting on a chair in a barbershop—similarly to what happens to Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*—, his mind wonders: "does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something?" (DeLillo 2008: 222) and these thoughts are an almost verbatim reproduction of Benno Levin's admission to Eric that "I want to kill you in order to count for something in my own life" (DeLillo 2012: 187). Benno's and Hammad's intention are so aligned that the two could be considered as the same character. Benno explains to Eric that "you're a figure whose thoughts and acts affect everybody, people, everywhere. I have history, as you said on my side. You have to die for how you think and act" (DeLillo 2012: 202) but these words might as well been Hammad's condemnation of America—as he, too, is rushing aesthetically in Kierkegaardian fashion towards suicide looking for "eternal life in the seconds to come" (DeLillo 2008: 305) and convinced that through his sacrifice he will reach "the absolute form of his spirit" (Kierkegaard 2004: 517).

Hammad's shedding of self-awareness, something that he is forced to go through to "become each other's running blood" (DeLillo 2008: 105) with his new-found brothers, bears striking similarities to Keith's "easing inward"—and so, also with the aesthetic life-view in which the condition of satisfaction is placed outside the individual and thus is ungraspable. In their attempt to escape the self, both characters seem to share a common "ascetic pattern", whose "typical motifs include severe physical discipline based on ritual repetition, reclusion in closed places or deserted landscapes, abandonment of conventional language uses, [...and] loss of shared spatial and temporal references" (Salvan 2010: 145). No wonder, then, that the narrator decides to tie Keith and Hammad together through a "plot that closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point" (DeLillo 2017: 221), and includes them both in one sentence at the end of the novel. This rhetorical strategy not only bares in front of the reader the ineluctable logic of cause and effect, but also evinces the "infinite number of sign-substitutions" (Derrida 1978: 279) that Derrida points out, thus manifesting the lack of a definitive referentiality.

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he [Hammad] watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. (DeLillo 2007: 306)

The chronological warp that sends us back a few pages before the beginning of the novel folds the narration, creating a hem in which lie both past and future of the plane crash. Jenn Brandt compares this structure to a Möbius strip, *i.e.*, a surface that has only one side and one boundary, because through inversion its sides are made continuous with each other. Here we find another analogy with Baudrillard's theory as he identifies the Möbius strip as the perfect synthesis of the "'vicious' curvature of a political space that is henceforth magnetized, circularized, reversibilized from right to left" where "all the referentials combine their discourses in a circular Mobian compulsion" (Baudrillard 1994: 18). When DeLillo mentions the Gulf War in his 2001 essay, he delineates a correspondence between that war and 9/11 that seemed lost on many Americans at that time. Indeed, none of the characters in the novel, except for Martin, take into account the chance that the two things could be remotely related: Lianne even receives a summons for jury duty in

the Blind Sheik<sup>6</sup> trial and she lies on the questionnaire to avoid taking part in it admitting that “she didn’t know the details of the charges made [...] because she wasn’t reading the stories in the newspaper” (DeLillo 2007: 227). The thread that links all these events together is invisible to the protagonists because their perspectives have been narrowed after the attacks, but DeLillo takes a stand when he mentions that “the dead are their own nation and race, one identity, young or old, devout or unbelieving - a union of souls” (DeLillo 2001) because he acknowledges not only the victims of 9/11, but also the perpetrators, suggesting that humans are virtually all the same.

In *Falling Man*, he also uses the metaphor of the organic shrapnel to enhance such a viewpoint and thus provides the reader with a medical definition to the syntactical clash of the two plotlines at the end of the novel:

In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber’s body. [...] Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel. (DeLillo 2007: 18)

This powerful image could also be considered as an allegory of trauma—using Marilyn Charles’ words to define it. In her essay, Charles affirms that “although trauma impedes cognitive capacities and integration of experience in the moment, it leaves its marks upon us and we decipher them over time, as parts of ourselves are annihilated or reconfigured” (Charles 2011: 434). The style of the novel itself seems to echo these words, since stories and memories develop through fragments that repeat, overlap, and interrupt each other—it is up to the reader to give shape and try to re-assemble all the pieces in some vague chronological order. Moreover, DeLillo refuses to use emotionally charged terms such as ‘Ground Zero’, ‘9/11’, and ‘Twin Towers’ but considers the event as a threshold of a new era when he states “these are the days after. Everything now is measured by after” (DeLillo 2007: 173), always counting the time with expressions such as “three days after the planes” (DeLillo 2007: 8) or “these three years past, since that day in September” (DeLillo 2007: 232). Through the repetition of temporal markers, he expresses the unconscious need of the characters to pin down even the smallest change to make sure everyday life does not just proceed haphazardly showing the “ways in which trauma fragments experience, such that dream, nightmare, and memory can seem so impossibly interwoven that ‘reality’ can be difficult to determine or rely on” (Charles 2011: 433).

The novel has a tripartite structure, and each part bears a man’s name: Bill Lawton, Ernst Hechinger, and David Janiak. The hazy sense of reality is also mirrored by the very choice of these names: Bill Lawton is evidently a misnomer for bin Laden, Ernst Hechinger is the withheld name of Nina’s lover, Martin Ridnour, and David Janiak is the real name of the performance artist “Falling Man” who appears throughout the novel in flash episodes. Through the use of metonymy, which means the transformation of a name in the same or in a different language, DeLillo

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<sup>6</sup> Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman was the leader of a terrorist group called Al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya, active in Egypt and in the US during the 1990s. Abdel-Rahman, as a preacher in the NYC area, was surrounded by devoted followers also responsible for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing—a terrorist attack often considered as a response to the US involvement in the Iraqi’s Gulf War. He was arrested in 1993 and convicted years later of, among other things, seditious conspiracy, solicitation to attack a U.S. military installation, and conspiracy to conduct bombings.

invites the reader to look harder and discover the truth behind what is commonly regarded or depicted in the news as plain and simple. The alteration of the name “bin Laden” strips it of all his features of otherness, likening him to just any American; it is not a sheer coincidence that the name was invented by the Neudeckers’ son Justin<sup>7</sup> and his friends, Robert and Katie, presumably because they innocently misheard it on TV. Indeed, Joseph Conte clarifies that “the familiar name is transposed on the mass murderer, but in return the attributes of the mass murderer are transposed on one very like us [...thus] reveal[ing] as much about the presumptuousness of American culture as he does of the nefariousness of the hijackers’ suicidal plot” (Conte 2011: 570). The intent of this literary device may be to denounce the American tendency to domesticate global problems, and this tendency, according to Baudrillard, can only lead to a “terroristic situational transfer”, which stands for the moment when “the Other” decides to change the rules as a reaction to the condensation of all power and functions in the hands of a technocratic global order. In his 2001 essay, the philosopher defines terrorism as “the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange. All the singularities (species, individuals and cultures) that have paid with their deaths for the installation of a global circulation governed by a single power are taking their revenge today” (Baudrillard 2003: 9). Therefore, it could be argued that in *Falling Man* DeLillo knits together those singularities with the system in power—both through the connection between Hammad and Keith, and through the metonymasia of “bin Laden/Bill Lawton”—to help the reader understand global forces that slowly and—seemingly—covertly brought to 9/11. Through the scattered but broad counter-narrative in *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man*, and “In the Ruins of the Future”, he is artfully criticizing America’s failings to perceive its own hand in the global events that 9/11 can and should be considered a response to and he is thus providing the key to a new reading of the terroristic attack, a reading that implies a re-evaluation of economic, political and human values on a global scale.

### 4.3. A Modern Response

Beyond the novel’s complex structure, the characters’ development further expands the scope and commentary that DeLillo offers to post-9/11 America and humanity in general. Lianne’s representation, more specifically, can be considered as a Gospel parable in her shift, through a Kierkegaardian lens, from the ethical to the religious stage. In her constant search to understand the environment and master her *mood*, we know that Lianne dissects language as a book editor. However—she confesses to Martin—, despite her attempt to find something beautiful and comforting in language that could ease the pain of the aftermath, she is obnubilated by frustration and anger. Martin’s suggestion—and it is not surprising, at this point, that he is the one delivering it—is to put some distance and analyze the terrorist attack coldly: “There’s the event, there’s the individual. Measure it. Let it teach you something. See it. Make yourself equal to it” (DeLillo 2008: 53). As it is in her nature to absorb everything, she immediately puts this suggestion into practice and soon realizes that her questions are “not answerable in a book on ancient alphabet” (DeLillo 2008: 28), the one she was working on at the beginning of the novel. Another attempt is made when her friend Carol, the executive editor, offers Lianne to work on “a treatise on plane hijacking” that “seems to predict what happened” (DeLillo 2008: 174-175). Lianne becomes obsessed with getting the book and believes it is precisely what she needs in order to follow Martin’s advice and

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<sup>7</sup> In one of his attempts at *bricolage*, as I mentioned earlier in the text.

see things critically and unemotionally. In her quest to understand the environment and gain control over the impending memory lapses—something that she fears might be the onset of the Alzheimer’s disease which took her father—, she behaves similarly to Eric and Keith, and thus falls victim to modes that belong to the aesthetic life-view, living “in the spirit of what is ever impending” (DeLillo 2008: 269). She compulsively counts backwards and carries out many medical check-ups only to find out that “the findings were *unremarkable*” (italics not mine, DeLillo 2008: 263). There is, nevertheless, something that provides a counter-altar to these compulsions and allows for the introspection that will ultimately lead to the ethical and religious state: the recurring meetings that she holds with the Alzheimer’s patients to remember her father and her own reading of Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

During these sessions that are defined as “their prayer room” (DeLillo 2008: 37), these people reflectively summon words about a specific topic on a pad and then share their thoughts and discuss it. One day, a member of the writing group, Rosellen S., gets lost on her way home letting the reader wonder if “Rosellen’s loss of proper orientation relative to home elaborates the metaphor of America’s post- 9/11 mental trauma as Alzheimer’s” (Giaino 2011: 173). It would, therefore, seem that these individuals, by losing their words, reason or consciousness, are somehow internalizing and recreating their own deterioration of the national US identity in the wake of the attacks. However, the reader soon discovers that the place where Rosellen winds up without proper orientation is a church, a “temple whose name was a hallelujah shout, where she’d found refuge and assistance” (DeLillo 2008: 197), thus showing how an individual, deprived of cognitive and rational functions, seems to be instinctively drawn to the spiritual—like a proverbial prodigal son who “was lost and is found” (Luke 15:32). Moreover, Rosellen’s momentary disappearance provides the topic for the following session, where each member wants to write about her. While doing so, Lianne “had begun to see the people before her” (DeLillo 2008: 178) for their story and their place in history, likening them to the old passport photos that Martin collected over the years. In those photos lied not only the microhistory of those people, but also a sense of otherness that faded into one, since in these migrants’ faces were “the hardships [of people fleeing] pressing the edges of the frame” that dissipated the different “images, words, languages, signatures, stamp advisories” (DeLillo 2008: 178-179). This represents Lianne’s first true step into the ethical life-view because she sees past the immediacy and into the roots that connect her to the whole. Kierkegaard explains that “in this history [she] stands in relation to other individuals of the [human] race and to the race as a whole, and in this history there is something painful, yet [she] is only the one [she] is in this history” (Kierkegaard 2004: 518). Then, he goes on, only in the acceptance of this pain and grievance will the individual repent and find oneself in love and God.

This last passage proves difficult for Lianne because we find her at the beginning of the novel “struggl[ing] with the idea of God” (DeLillo 2008: 81). She struggled because she wanted to trust, instead, the forces and process of the natural world as explained by scientific endeavors, fearing that “God would crowd her, make her weak” and so she decides to embark on a mission to “snuff out the shaky faith she’d held for much of her life” (DeLillo 2008: 82). Moreover, she finds herself surrounded by people who are angry at God and do not seem to forgive him after the event: first, one of the patients during the sessions (79), then, even her own mother, Nina, blames God as mandate of the jihadists’ actions since they invoked him, and he allowed for the massacre to happen (141). Lianne’s anchor, however, to her “shaky faith” turns out to be Kierkegaard himself, as we discover that there was a time when she used to know the answer to everything and “she used to love Kierkegaard right down to the spelling of his name”, reading him “with a feverish expectancy, straight into the Protestant badlands of sickness onto death” (DeLillo 2008: 148). In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, the *sickness onto death* is represented by the despair that one feels when not moving in the right direction—and according to God’s will—to become their true self. While she still rec-



ognizes the need for eternal validity and the desire “to transcend, [...] to pass beyond the limits of safe understanding” (DeLillo 2008: 79), Lianne seems unable to reach it. What she found in her reading of Kierkegaard—and what provided me with the idea to analyze these novels through his lens—is that he brought her on the brink of a spiritual awakening. Lianne confesses that she saw herself in the despair of Kierkegaard’s sentence: “*The whole of existence frightens me*” (italics not mine), she says, while the narrator adds that “[Kierkegaard] made her feel that her thrust into the world was not the slender melodrama she sometimes thought it was” (DeLillo 2008: 149). It would seem, then, that, by accessing Kierkegaard’s philosophy, Lianne manages to overcome the lack of meaning in the fictionalized repetitions and compulsions—the “melodrama”—that is the staged life of the characters after 9/11. The definitive step towards the ethical stage happens for Lianne during a parade three years after the attack. This parade is “a march against the war, the president, and the policies” that bears similarities with the protest in *Cosmopolis*. However, instead of seeing herself as an individual in opposition to the crowd, like Eric did, she embraces the parade in all its otherness. When “the woman in the black headscarf” hands her a leaflet with the word *Islam* on top of it, “she felt all the bitter truth that stereotypes contained” (DeLillo 2008: 236) and in that moment she strips that woman of those stereotypes and, ethically, understands that “even the humblest individual has a dual existence. Also [one] has a history, and this is not the product of his own free actions. But the inward belongs to [one]self and will belong to [oneself] in all eternity” (Kierkegaard 2004: 489). By disjoining the individual from stereotypes of national propaganda, she acknowledges her identity in relation to others as individuals—and consequently to “the whole”—and not as product of geopolitical interactions. She admits this herself in an inner monologue: “What she began to feel, aside from helplessness, was a heightened sense of who she was in relation to the others, thousands of them, orderly but all-enclosing” and “being in a crowd, this was a religion in itself” (DeLillo 2008: 235).

The last step that would make Lianne the model of the ethical life-view is the acceptance of God through repentance and guilt. This revelation comes to her when, after the parade, her reticent son Justin tells her in just five words the best thing he has ever learned at school: that “the sun is a star”. Only then does Lianne perceive the importance of a reference point, like God, around which everything is ordered. This simple sentence bears for Lianne “a fresh way to think about being who we are, the purest way and only finally unfolding, a kind of mystical shiver, an awakening” (DeLillo 2008: 239). As she is clearly now, for the first time in a long time, considering herself in relation to God, she has *doubts*. Just like Eric, she is vexed by “a sadness that yearns for something intangible and vast” (DeLillo 2008: 296)—the “melancholy” that Kierkegaard identifies “when the spirit demands a higher form” (Kierkegaard 2004: 499). However, she tries to resist it “because once you believe in such a thing, God is, then how can you escape, how survive the power of it, is and was and ever shall be” (DeLillo 2008: 299). Indeed, to accept God in Kierkegaardian terms means to repent, to choose oneself as guilty, and to abandon oneself in his arms in resignation. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard synthesizes what it means to have faith through the Biblical story of Abraham’s near-killing of Isaac, explaining that “he had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the way” (Kierkegaard 1983: 36). And so, Abraham had faith that God would not sacrifice Isaac but he was willing to do it if it was demanded. This resignation leads to ultimate love but passes through guilt over one’s sins and their fathers’. To be really at peace—to find God—is to come to terms with what has happened and our hand in it, something that DeLillo may thus implicitly be saying with this novel. Paul Giaimo also recognizes Lianne as “an ideal Kierkegaardian in terms of moral authenticity” (Giaimo 2011: 174). However, in his view, her leap of faith, *i.e.*, an act of belief regardless of the consequences, is strongly connected with her accepting Keith back home and “falling” again in their relationship while maintaining a strong inner compass when he disappears in the world of gambling tourna-

ments. I would argue, instead, that Lianne's development moves parallel to Keith's but in opposite direction, each of them on a completely different journey. While Keith is aesthetically postponing the moment of Kierkegaardian choice in the casinos of Las Vegas, Lianne is embracing despair and accepting God, after having put it on hold for many years. We find her in the last pages of the novel "ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day" because now "she thought that God was the thing, the entity existing outside space and time that resolved this doubt [in the soul]" (DeLillo 2008: 301).

There is, moreover, a figure in the novel that plays a role in Lianne's awakening: the performance artist "Falling Man" who makes appearances dangling from high buildings out of the blue in the months following the terrorist attack, taking aback casual bystanders in crowded places and causing a storm in the press. The real name of the artist is David Janiak and at the end of the novel Lianne will discover his identity reading in the obituary pages that he anticlimactically died "from natural causes" three years after 9/11. His falls were never announced in advanced and "he worked without pulleys, cables or wires. Safety harness only. And no bungee cord to absorb the shock of longer falls", so he "suffered from chronic depression due to a spinal condition" (DeLillo 2007: 283). Janiak recreated the abeyance of Jonathan Briley's fall from one of the towers as captured in the famous photo taken by Richard Drew and published by *The New York Times* the day after the attack. Lianne reads about the comparison in the newspapers, but her mind goes even one step further linking his name to "a trump card in a tarot deck, Falling Man, name in gothic type, the figure twisting down in a stormy night sky" (DeLillo 2007: 281). Indeed, Janiak's pose is very similar to that of a card from the Major Arcana of the Tarot called the Hanged Man. This card is generally associated with meditation and the possibility of wisdom, but also with ultimate surrender, martyrdom and sacrifice to the greater good. Janiak's staging of a "memento mori" jars Lianne out of her numbness and, by absorbing the live performance and photographing it in her mind, she somehow manages to overcome the tragic death of her father. The pain and horror of that event, of 9/11, and of death itself are processed and accepted when mediated by this messianic figure—symbolically standing for art itself—who is sacrificing himself and who "held the gaze of the world. [...] The single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all" (DeLillo 2007: 41).

For Lianne, art allows for introspection—like the human transience that she saw in the still life thanks to her mother's influence—and triggers a healing process that makes her see things more clearly and keeps her from getting caught in the undertow of the events. Marilyn Charles legitimizes the power of art in response to trauma admitting that "because of the potential for saying and unsaying, art allows us to represent truths that we are repressing as a culture and thus failing to recognize, truths that may be vitally important but that we are having difficulty integrating into our waking understanding" (Charles 2011: 436). It could be argued that, just like the selfless performance artist David Janiak, DeLillo offers an artistic rendition of the aftermath of 9/11, allowing us to register it one layer at a time, by not letting the rush of the events dictate the pace of the novel, but rather controlling those events through the words of his characters as they slowly reassemble the puzzle of their lives. The salvific power of art is also acknowledged by Kierkegaard in his many journals and writings. According to Antony Aumann, art for Kierkegaard functions as "an indirect method of instructions" that maieutically allows the subject to ponder and arrive to the relevant lesson. Aumann explains that art can be considered "indirect" because "rather than straightforwardly telling us the truth, [it] teaches us by empowering us to uncover the truth for ourselves. It provides us with the tools, training, and background resources we need to make discoveries on our own" (Aumann 2019: 168). It can then be argued that both "Falling Man" the artist and *Falling Man* the novel share this role of maieutic teacher, so that Lianne, and consequently the reader, can find the answers that they need in order to accept grief and find meaning.

In our case, the answer to the Postmodern lack of a centered structure, one-to-one referentiality, and surplus availability of meaning that DeLillo denounces in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* can be found in a Modern set of texts—like Kierkegaard’s philosophy—that infers meaning through choosing oneself and, as a result, absolute spirituality. Even Derrida recognizes that the missing center of the structure has been identified throughout the centuries in many ways, among them “presence, eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God and man” (Derrida 1978: 280), and so it does not come as a surprise that DeLillo also suggests similar responses to the dissolution of the sense of reality. The Modern answer to the Postmodern disjointedness manifests itself in the yearning for transcendentality and in the awakening of a consciousness that leads to “the most intimate cohesion with the surrounding world” (Kierkegaard 2004: 535) and it is in this both individual and communal awakening that it is possible to purchase one’s freedom in order to stay in it (Kierkegaard 2004: 529).

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